



## Film review: *District 9*

Seth D. Baum

Department of Geography and Rock Ethics Institute, Pennsylvania State University

E-mail: [sbaum@psu.edu](mailto:sbaum@psu.edu)

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The recent film *District 9* (dir. Neill Blomkamp, 2009) raises several issues of significance to transhumanism. These issues include whether it is permissible to give a human being superhuman powers against his will, under what circumstances humans will be accepting of transhumans or posthumans, and what roles space colonization and extraterrestrial encounter may play in the future of humanity. Consideration of these issues deepens the viewing experience, and it can inform current decisions about transhumanism's future as a cultural movement.

The film depicts an encounter between humanity and extraterrestrials. While it develops the theme of tensions between the two civilizations, it is anything but a standard-issue war of the worlds. Whenever violence breaks out, it is limited to localized police operations, insurgencies, and crimes, not focused efforts at extermination. Furthermore, the film offers ambiguity about which civilization we should be rooting for and even about where one civilization ends and the other begins – where do we draw the line? This ambiguity – and the audience reaction it generates – is of much interest to transhumanism. In this review, I explain these themes and their significance. In doing so, I will give away much of the plot (so please be warned), but I also offer some suggestions for how to proceed with future viewings of the film.

*District 9* involves a large ship full of extraterrestrials (referred to in the film as *non-humans*) who seek refuge on Earth. In a symbolic nod to apartheid, the ship lands above Johannesburg. Finding the non-humans malnourished and weary from travel, humans bring them to Earth and set them up in a slum-like refugee camp (the District 9 of the title). Eventually, tensions develop between the two populations. The plot thickens when one human, Wilkus van der Merwe, is exposed to a substance that causes him to mutate slowly into something non-human, much like Seth Brundle in *The Fly* (dir. David Cronenberg, 1986). Wilkus becomes a fugitive and seeks refuge in District 9. There he meets a non-human named Christopher Johnson, who is masterminding a secret plan to

restart the non-humans' ship and evacuate his people. Wilkus and Christopher gradually develop mutual trust as they fight off greedy and ruthless human corporate interests in attempt to execute Christopher's plan. A running theme here is Wilkus's gradual transformation from a devout abider of human rules to a selfish survivalist, and ultimately to an altruistic friend of the non-humans. It's as if he must lose his humanity to become truly human.

By highlighting corporate greed, the film casts at least part of humanity in a negative light. (There are some more positive human characters, but these play only minor roles.) The corporation, blandly named Multi-National United (or MNU), seeks to harness non-human weapons technology for considerable profit. To this end, MNU considers any means justified, including numerous painful and fatal medical experiments on non-humans. (The experiments are performed because non-human weapons are genetically encoded so that only non-humans can use them.) Similar viciousness is displayed by Nigerian gangs living in District 9; they barter with non-humans while making their own attempt to harness non-human weaponry.

The Nigerians take one rather noteworthy step that the other humans decline: they eat non-humans in attempt to gain their powers. Thus, one can argue, these Nigerians are transhumanists of a kind, seeking to transcend their original biology in order to enhance their capabilities. But the crudeness of their attempts at transcendence makes them appear paradoxically at once primitive and transhumanist in their goals. Ultimately, however, all their efforts are unsuccessful, including an attempt to eat Wilkus.

Wilkus is not at all a transhumanist, even though he is very much a transhuman – a human being in transition to something else with superior abilities. His mutation is entirely accidental, and he laments it so much that he goes to great lengths, throughout the film, to attempt to reverse it. This raises ethical issues of broader significance to transhumanism. Is it permissible to give someone beyond-human capabilities against his, or her, will? Perhaps not, all else being equal, but what if these capabilities serve some greater purpose? And how much greater must that purpose be?

The exploitation by others of Wilkus's mutation against his will reaches a peak when he is taken into MNU custody. MNU attempts to use his mutated body for its commercial advantage, even knowing that this would bring Wilkus a painful death. The film emphasizes the episode's gruesome nature, leading the audience to reject MNU's tactics. The rejection is that much stronger because MNU's broader objective – development of lucrative weaponry – is not seen as noble, even though the film does not explain what purposes the weapons would be sold for.

Those fellow moviegoers whom I asked about this replied that they would reject MNU's tactics even if the ends were more noble, for example to cure major diseases. This scene is thus at heart a classic case of consequentialist versus deontological ethics. By highlighting the gruesomeness, it induced a deontological reaction in my companions: no ends could justify this terrible means. As someone who is consciously consequentialist, I had a very different reaction: I found myself agreeing with MNU's tactics, contingent on the assumption that their ends were worthy. Likewise, a deontologist might argue that it is impermissible to give someone new capabilities against his/her will. By contrast, I would permit this given adequate ends, in particular to reduce existential risk (see Bostrom 2002; 2003).

In any event, Wilkus escapes MNU, leading to his and Christopher's emergence as the film's protagonists. The two are imperfect, but likable, characters. They are also, most notably, a non-human and a human/non-human mutant in a film with many human characters. I found it interesting to watch the audience develop empathy for these two instead of the film's humans. Clearly, the humans in the cinematic audience develop empathy for whichever film characters

exhibit such traits such as fairness and compassion, even if other characters are more genetically similar.

This result is an important one for transhumanism. A major impediment to transhumanism is a strong backlash that includes an argument that transhuman or posthuman beings should be rejected because of their differences from humans (for discussion see Bostrom and Ord 2006). But if transhumans (and perhaps also transhumanists) exhibit desirable character traits, then perhaps they can gain acceptance, just as the transhuman Wilkus gains acceptance from the audience in *District 9*.

The transhuman characters and the audience reactions that the film causes are not *District 9*'s only important attributes. Also important are the themes of space travel, survival, and inter-civilization interaction. Regarding space travel, one simple fact is paramount: the non-humans can travel through space whereas the humans cannot. The non-humans' space travel capability offers them a resilience in the face of home-planet disaster that human civilization currently lacks. If such resilience is desirable – if our collective survival is important – then we should concentrate on developing (now or eventually) space travel capability, whether through superior tools or by technologically-mediated evolution (i.e., by transhumanist means).

Regarding inter-civilization interaction, *District 9* suggests the complex interactions that can take place. (For a discussion of the likelihood of humans encountering extraterrestrials, see Ćirković 2003.) Such complexity parallels the multiple relationships found in historical encounters between different human populations, such as the European-Native American encounters. It may thus be mistaken to treat each civilization as a monolithic entity and to assume that an encounter would have one homogenous outcome. I have been guilty of these mistakes myself (see Baum forthcoming). To be sure, in an encounter between civilizations of different planets, the most likely result may be the rapid destruction of one or both civilizations, as a result of warfare, disease, or haphazard destruction. We neglect these scenarios at our peril. Given that some protracted interaction occurs, however, as *District 9* reminds us, we should not assume a simple zero-sum interaction.

*District 9* thus offers opportunities for reflecting upon humanity's place in the grander scheme of things. These reflections are of immediate relevance to decisions we face about transhumanism, space colonization, and the search for extraterrestrial intelligence. To my disappointment, the film does not set aside adequate time to highlight the very deep issues it raises. Some quiet, reflective moments would have made it more memorable – like, for example, *The Matrix* (dir. Larry and Andy Wachowski, 1999), with its moments of reflection on artificial intelligence, free will, and the blissfulness of ignorance. Nonetheless, *District 9* is an enjoyable watch. I recommend viewing it with these issues in mind, as a basis for reflection and discussion.

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